CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

By ARTHUR BARTLETT MAURICE

IF, twenty years ago, a popular vote had been taken to decide who was the most eminent literary figure in the United States some sort of a plurality that meant very little would naturally have been reached. Had the question, however, been who was the best loved literary figure there would have been an overwhelming majority, and most of the insignificant minority would later have pleaded oversight in extenuation. For James Whitcomb Riley was, and is, as close to the heart of the American people as Robert Burns has been for more than a hundred years to the heart of the Scottish people. Riley is the American Burns. More than any other poems of American origin, "When the frost is on the pumpkin and the corn is in the shock" and "Little Orphant Annie" and "Knee Deep in June" and the rest correspond to "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon" and "Tam o' Shanter."

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HAPPILY, the life of James Whitcomb Riley is much more pleasant to contemplate than that of Robert Burns. Alloway Kirk and the Burns birthplace, near by, and Poosie Nancy's Tavern of the "Jolly Beggars," at Mauchline, are held as shrines, and wherever Scots foregather they hold Burns dinners and wax sentimental over the memory of their plowman poet. But in his lifetime he was little more than the "incontinent yokel with a taste for metricism" that the Englishman T. W. H. Crosland called him in his book, "The Unspeakable Scot." There was a little momentary glow of pleasant celebrity, but after that the "Holy Willies" of reform of his day saw to his punishment. Riley in his early life had his share of the healthy, stimulating up and downs of fortune. But in that part of his existence which is the subject of Marcus Dickey's "The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley" (Bobbs, Merrill Company) the fire of a nation's affection for him was burning brightly.

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NEVERTHELESS, even in the ripe years when honors were being thrust upon him, Riley occasionally encountered his "Holy Willies." Mr. Dickey, in the course of the chapter "In the Hearts of the People," writes: "A self-righteous few were for a long time concerned about the poet's salvation; and these also, at times, made the poet pace the floor. Once a revivalist, more ambitious than religious, gained entrance to Riley's room with a view of 'saving his soul,' as he termed it. Riley had been so busy writing poems that he had forgotten he had a soul, and he promptly let the intruder know it. The revivalist persisting, the poet picked up his Bible and said: 'Let me read from the inspired word of Longfellow as recorded in "The New England Tragedies."'"

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TO turn back for a moment from the James Whitcomb Riley upon whom a half dozen American universities were conferring degrees to the Riley of frivolous and impetuous youth. Not within the province of this book is the story of the "Leonanie hoax," yet that story is one of the imperishable gems of American literary anecdote. It all happened when Riley was on a country newspaper, the Anderson *Democrat*, "lisping in numbers for the numbers came," but earning his scant bread by gathering "locals" and writing advertisements. As was the case with young Kipling in India, Riley's senior editor deplored the poet's leaning to rime as sheer waste of time. "Drivel and nonsense" he called the verses that his subordinate was dashing off when he should have been concerned with "items." But if Riley was without honor in his own town he found an admirer in the editor of the Kokomo *Despatch*, and with the connivance of that admirer he conceived and carried out the "Leonanie hoax."

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FIRST "Leonanie" was written and then Riley invented the story of its discovery in a cave in Howard county and the reasons for believing it to be the work of the author of "The Raven." In the Kokomo *Despatch* of August 2, 1877, the poem and the account appeared, headed: "A Hitherto Unpublished Poem of the Lamented Edgar Allan Poe Written on the flyleaf of an Old Book Now in Possession of a Gentleman in This City." The account went on: "The following beautiful posthumous poem from the pen of the erratic poet Edgar Allan Poe we believe has never been published in any form, either in any published collection of Poe's poems now extant or in any magazine or newspaper of any description; and until the critics shall show conclusively to the contrary the *Despatch* shall claim the honor of giving it to the world."

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SPECIOUS was the account of discovery. The narrator told of calling at a house in the city, noticing a poem written on a flyleaf and bearing the initials "E. A. P" and eliciting the following bit of reminiscence: "He (the host) said he did not know who the author was, only that he was a young man; that is, he was a young man when he wrote the lines referred to. He had never seen him himself, but heard his grandfather, who gave him the book containing the verses, tell of the cirumstance and the occasion by which he, the grandfather, came into possession of the book. His grandparents kept a country hotel, a sort of wayside inn, in a small village called Chesterfield, near Richmond, Va. One night, just before bedtime, a young man who showed plainly the marks of dissipation rapped at the door and asked if he could stay all night. That was the last seen of him. In the morning he was gone, leaving the book, on the flyleaf of which the lines were written."

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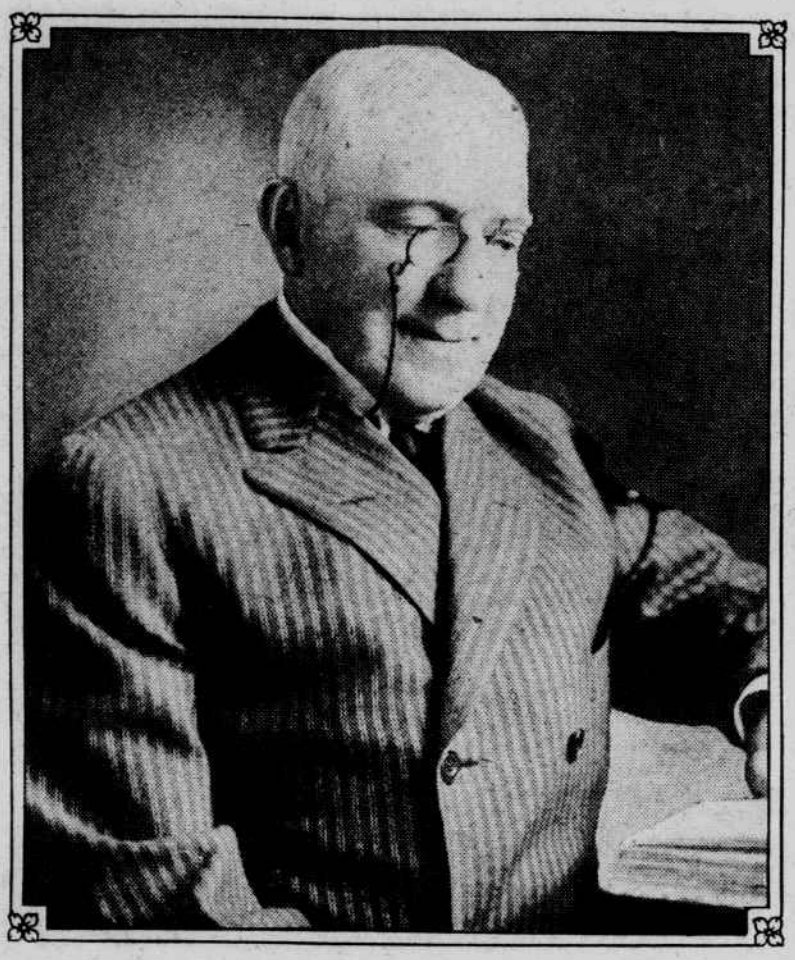
HERE is what purported to be Poe's "Leonanie":

Leonanie angels named her;
And they took the light
Of the laughing stars and framed her
In a smile of white;
And they made her hair of gloomy
Midnight, and her eyes of bloomy
Moonshine, and they brought her to me
In a solemn night.

In a solemn night of summer,
When my heart of gloom
Blossomed up to meet the comer
Like a rose in bloom;
All forebodings that distressed me
I forgot—as joy caressed me—
(Lying joys that caught and pressed me
In the arms of doom):

Only spake the little lisper
In the angel tongue;
Yet I, listening, heard her whisper:



James Whitcomb Riley.

"Songs are only sung
Here below that they may grieve you—
Tales are told you to deceive you
While her love is young."

Then God smiled and it was morning,
Matchless and supreme;
Heaven's glory seemed adorning
Earth with its esteem:
Every heart but mine seemed gifted
With the voice of prayer and lifted
Where my Leonanie drifted
From me like a dream.

E. A. P.

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WITH youthful glee Riley and his confederate manufactured supporting evidence. To meet a possible investigation lines of Poe's manuscript were dug up and the chirography diligently copied in pale ink on the blank pages of old, yellowed books. The rival of the Anderson *Democrat*, the *Herald*, in reprinting "Leonanie" from the Kokomo *Despatch*, prophesied, "We expect a rhapsody of jealous censure from the jingling editor of the sheet across the way, and shall wait with the first anxiety ever experienced for the appearance of the *Democrat*. We look for an exhausting and damning criticism from Riley, who will doubtless fail to see 'Leonanie's' apochryphal merit, and discover its obvious faults." Naturally Riley did not disappoint the *Herald* editor. With beautiful gravity he weighed the poem and the probability of Poe being its author, and in the next issue the *Herald* man congratulated himself on his fulfilled prophecy. "True to our prognostication of last week," he said, "J. W. Riley, editor of the *Democrat*, slashes into 'Leonanie' in a jealous manner."

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BUT the joke proved too successful. All over the country "Leonanie" was copied. The best known critics in the land wrote ponderously pro and con regarding the poem's authenticity. A Boston publishing house, having a life of Poe in preparation, wrote to the *Despatch* asking for the original manuscript of "Leonanie." Riley, appalled at the turn that the situation was taking, wrote repeatedly to the Kokomo editor asking him to *turn off* the current and to end the whole matter before it became too serious by an explanation to the public. He felt that, like Frankenstein, he had builded up a monster to destroy him. But the editor of the Kokomo *Despatch* insisted on continuing the joke, though he thought it prudent to decline to send the manuscript to the Boston publishing house. Eventually the *Despatch*, warned in time that its rival in Kokomo was in possession of the facts, disclosed the true authorship of "Leonanie."

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TO revert to Mr. Dickey's book. There is a chapter on Riley's pen names. "Not until he had published his first book did the poet abandon the use of noms de plume and, as he said, set his full name at the dashboard of the whole endurin' alphabet. But even after that he was fond of signing fictitious names to letters, such as Doc Marigold, Uncle Sidney, Brother Whittleford, The Bad Haroun, Troubled Tom, Old E. Z. Mark, James Popcorn Riley, and to literary editors James Hoosier Riley, the Whitcomb Poet. At other times, particularly when chatting with friends, he was Truthful James, Philiper Flash, the Remarkable Man and an Adjustable Lunatic. J. Whit or Jay Whit was his first pseudonym in prose, affixed to sketches long since consigned to the 'phantom past'—stories too scant of genius or talent for publication. In poetry he first signed himself 'Edyrn' to such baubles as 'A Backward Look' and others, manuscripts now stained by the passage of half a century."

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A PRACTICAL joker from the beginning, he met the fate of all practical jokers in having the joke occasionally turned on him. There was a certain Dr. Smith who waited for years for his revenge. The opportunity came when Delhi tendered Riley, then at the height of his fame, a public benefit. "It was," writes Mr. Dickey, "a memorable evening, the poet was at his best in his recitations and everybody satisfied—with one exception. That night Riley slept in Dr. Smith's office, in a little room separated by a thin partition, half way to the ceiling, from the main office. The next morning a woman called at the office while Riley was still sleeping. She had a biting tongue and a prejudice against all forms of entertainment, and the doctor knew it. Here was his chance.

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AS the patient rose to go Dr. Smith said: 'By the way, did you hear Riley last night?' 'Yes,' she answered. 'Did you even waste money so recklessly before?' asked the doctor, contributing to the severity of the criticism he was certain would follow. 'I never did,' said she. 'The Hoosier Poet comes up here to our town sponsored by Billings, Mark Twain and Longfellow. Burdette says he is pure gold; I say he is pure gabble—if I had my money back——' Scarcely had she uttered the words when flip over the partition came a silver half dollar. . . . In a few minutes Riley came through the partition. 'Wee-well,' smiled the doctor, 'I did not know you were awake.' 'I was not awake,' drawled Riley wearily, 'but there are times—there are times—when suffering from nightmare—that I—that I reach my trousers—and my pocketbook—in my sleep.'"

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SCATTERED here and there through Philip Guedalla's really brilliantly written "The Second Empire" (G. P. Putnam's Sons) are glimpses of some of the men of letters of that extraordinary period. The third Napoleon was wise enough to realize the power that the writer's pen and the cartoonist's pencil

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